

USING FOCUS GROUPS IN COMMUNITY-FOCUSED COURT PLANNING

In California, the Chief Justice has joined with other leaders in the commitment to institutionalizing effective community-focused court planning as an integral part of the way courts conduct their business. This is intended to encourage public trust and confidence through participation and decentralized court management, thus ensuring the independence of the courts and a new level of excellence in California's justice system. The following guidelines on the use of focus groups were developed to assist county court planning teams in formulating their community-focused court plans.

One of the most important steps in community-focused court planning is the gathering of relevant information on which to base and/or refine planning goals. The effective use of **focus groups** as a means of gathering data can help in this process. Determining how the community perceives their local courts and court services and what needs they would like to have addressed gives the local planning team concrete data for constructing and substantiating a strategic plan.

These guidelines were designed to be used with Steps 2 – 5 of the 5-Step Planning Model introduced at the Statewide Community-Focused Court Planning Conference — *Courts and Their Communities: Local Planning and the Renewal of Public Trust and Confidence* — in May 1998. We hope that your team will find these guidelines useful.

Editorial Acknowledgment: All of the materials in this outline were synthesized from the publications listed in the Bibliography – particularly the texts authored by Richard A. Krueger and David L. Morgan. These resources provide detailed information on the effective use of focus groups and are recommended for use by the county court planning teams.

Background Information

What is a focus group?

A focus group is a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment.

What purposes does a focus group serve?

In a focus group, the emphasis is on discovery, on sharing perceptions, on gathering information. *A focus group is not charged with solving a problem, rather the focus group and its members provide a method for gathering research data that will be used by others for the purpose of solving a problem.* In the context of county court strategic planning, once a focus group has met and its members have contributed their ideas, the data gathered is organized and analyzed by the local county court planning team. The analyzed data is used by the county courts and the team in developing the county courts' strategic, operational, and action plans to address court and community needs.

How is a focus group conducted?

A focus group is traditionally conducted with approximately 6 to 10 people who are selected because they have certain characteristics in common that relate to the topic of the focus group. A focus group is conducted by a facilitator who guides/leads the discussion, assisted by someone who takes notes and/or operates recording devices.

Typically a focus group interview session is repeated several times with different groups – usually with at least 3 groups, but sometimes with as many as several dozen. Group sessions ordinarily last anywhere from 1 to 2 hours depending on the agenda. *It should be noted that focus groups must be planned and operated skillfully in order to avoid biasing the information gathered.* (See section II beginning on page 8 for more detailed information on how to conduct focus groups).

How is a focus group different than a community forum?

Focus groups are small groups of individuals who are specifically invited to participate in focus group sessions. Community forums are open meetings to which all members of the community are invited to

offer information and perspective to the courts. Each type of meeting serves a purpose in the community-focused court planning process:

- (1) Community forums enable broad community participation and establish the courts' willingness to listen to community concerns;
- (2) Focus groups enable in-depth discussions on focused topics with specific members of the community who are effective spokespeople for the segment of the community of which they are a part.

The importance of maintaining confidentiality.

Focus group organizers should keep in mind from the outset that maintaining confidentiality is crucial when using focus groups as a data-gathering device for community-focused court planning. Such diligence is especially important since focus groups relating to community organizations often get sidetracked onto an evaluation of agency professionals. *Thus, organizers must ensure that the names of group participants and court staff are not included in final report documents and that information gathered from focus groups is not circulated outside the appropriate court planning groups or released to the press for publication.* It is worth noting that even documents that do not specifically name individuals can be used to identify them based on context. Finally, remember that the purpose of conducting focus groups in community-focused court planning is to gather public reaction to court programs, building facilities, and activities – *not to critique judges and/or court staff.* Organizers should remain cognizant of this fact at every stage of the focus group process.

Why use focus groups in the court planning process?

Historically, focus groups have been used to provide the data for a wide variety of project undertakings – most notably for product marketing, academic research and *quality improvement*. Because striving for quality improvement is a crucial aspect of community-focused court planning, it makes sense for local planning teams to consider using focus groups in their efforts. Quality improvement teams in the private sector listen to the interaction between focus group members to find opportunities for enhancing an existing way of doing things. Members of the county court planning team have been charged with a similar mission.

Encourage the use of volunteers.

County planning teams are encouraged to search for and request the assistance of local volunteers to assist in designing and conducting focus group sessions. Some possible sources of such volunteers or collaborators are local university and community college social science programs, local private research firms, experienced consultants, or private business interests experienced in conducting focus groups.

What's in these guidelines?

The following guidelines are presented in three sections:

- I. Use of Focus Groups in the Five-Step Community-Focused Court Planning Model
- II. Organizing and Conducting Focus Group Sessions
- III. Sample Introductory Remarks and Focus Group Questions

I. Use of Focus Groups in the Five-Step Community-Focused Court Planning Model

Steps 2 through 5 of the Community-Focused Court Planning Model specify different activities that could benefit from the use of focus groups.¹ It is up to the county court planning team to determine whether to use focus groups at any or all of the stages of the planning process described below.

Step 2 — Articulating the Courts' Vision and Mission	
Charge to the Planning Team	How Focus Groups Can Help
<p><i>Step 2</i> centers on identifying, understanding and preserving the core values and ideology of the court system while finding ways to stimulate progress and change. Thus, it would be helpful for the local teams to become familiar with the core values and goals already articulated in the Judicial Council's Long-Range Strategic Plan, <i>Leading Justice Into the Future</i> (i.e., maintaining and improving access, fairness, and diversity; ensuring independence and accountability; modernizing judicial administration practices; promoting quality of justice and services to the public; and promoting judicial branch education and professional development).²</p>	<p>The team should give careful thought to how the statewide values correspond to local needs. Focus groups can help the local team get a feel for how successful the community thinks the local courts have been in living up to articulated core values and goals. A carefully organized and managed focus group can provide a wealth of information useful to the team in articulating the vision and mission of the court and its functional areas of responsibility</p>

¹ Note: Step 1 of the 5-Step Model relates to creating a "sense of community" among team members and between the courts and their communities; it is not a "data gathering step" and therefore, is not included as a step that would require the use of focus groups.

² See also the core values implicit in the Trial Court Performance Standards.

Step 3 — Identifying Emerging Trends, Stakeholder Expectations, and Key Results Areas	
Charge to the Planning Team	How Focus Groups Can Help
<p><i>Step 3</i> focuses on examining current court operations and considering likely future needs.</p>	<p>Once the team has considered community values and familiarized themselves with what is articulated in the Judicial Council's Strategic Plan, the team can use focus groups to help <i>identify problems</i> in the existing court system. Focus groups can be used to gather public reaction to current court operations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do current operations correspond to the vision and mission of the court? • How satisfactory is customer service? • What court programs/services are most problematic? • What are the emerging trends – such as Internet access, computerized services, courts of specific jurisdiction, etc., – that need to be addressed by the courts? • Which programs/services need to be expanded in order to meet community needs and to comply with new trends? • What services need to be added/eliminated for the same reasons? • What are the strengths and weaknesses of the courts in these regards? <p>The data gathered from focus group meetings can give the planning team the information they need to develop plan goals to address areas in need of improvement.</p>

Step 4 — Developing Priority Goals and Measures of Success	
Charge to the Planning Team	How Focus Groups Can Help
By this stage of the planning process (<i>Step 4</i>), the local team should be well into the drafting of plan priority goals and measures of success. These priority goals address specific, previously identified areas of need and articulate measures of success that describe how individuals will act or feel differently following their interactions with the local courts.	<p>Focus groups can be used to gather public reaction to, and perspectives on, the goals that the local team has written. As the focus group participants bounce the planning team's ideas back and forth, they provide useful suggestions about how to realize them and they can point out potential pitfalls in the stated goals and objectives.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do the draft goals actually address community needs? • Are they realistic? • Are the stated measures of success measurable, and by what means? <p>The information gathered can be useful to the team in revising and fine-tuning the first draft of its plan.</p>

Step 5 — Designing Implementation Strategies and Monitoring Success	
Charge to the Planning Team	How Focus Groups Can Help
In <i>Step 5</i> the county court planning team is writing specific objectives and tasks and pairing them with the goals they have already established. They are also identifying methods for implementing the plan – such as setting milestone dates, designating responsible individuals or groups who will be charged with accomplishing specific tasks, and identifying evaluation strategies.	<p>Focus groups can be used at this step in much the same way as they are used in Step 4. In discussing the objectives and tasks set by the planning team, members of a focus group can provide information on how best to guarantee successful implementation. They can also point out potential problem areas and provide the planning team with new perspectives and a reality check on their work. Once again, such data can be useful in revising and fine-tuning the courts' plan.</p>

II. Organizing and Conducting Focus Group Sessions

1. *Define the purpose and desired outcome of the focus group.*

The first thing the county court planning team should do in preparing for the use of focus groups is to identify what the team needs from the focus group at each step in the process. Be clear about this and write it down.

2. *Identify personnel and staffing resources.*

Depending on the scope of the county court planning team's use of focus groups, appropriate attention will need to be given to who does what, when it will be done, and where it will be done. At the very least, the county team will need to consider the following:

- a. How will focus group members be recruited? By an outside recruiter? By local advertising? How much will recruiting cost?
- b. Will focus group members be volunteers or will they be paid for their time?
- c. Where will the focus groups be held? In a public (free) facility? In a rented facility? What are the anticipated costs, if any?
- d. What equipment will be needed during the focus groups? Flip charts, chalkboards, tape recorders? Who will be responsible for delivery and set up of the equipment at the focus group meetings?
- e. What sort of record keeping will be used with the focus group? For example, will focus group meetings be transcribed from audio tapes?
- f. Who will write the all-important focus group questions? A volunteer, a hired professional, members of the local planning team, or a subcommittee of it?
- g. Who will facilitate the focus groups? A planning team member, a volunteer, or a hired professional?

3. *Develop the timeline for the focus group project and assign staff and/or volunteers.*

Allow enough time for thoughtful discussion of what the planning team hopes to gain from conducting focus groups. Then set a timeline – with milestone dates – for planning, conducting, and evaluating the focus group sessions. Assign staff/volunteers/planning team members to each of the following tasks:

- a. Obtaining meeting venues and handling logistics for each session
- b. Writing the focus group questions
- c. Putting the focus group together

- d. Choosing a focus group facilitator
- e. Analyzing and reporting focus group results

4. Writing effective focus group questions — An overview.

The questions used with your focus groups are extremely important because they determine the quality and usefulness of the data gathered. Professional researchers often devote weeks to the development of the ten to twelve carefully articulated questions normally used in a focus group. However, it *is* possible to develop effective questions without using a professional. All it takes is careful thought about the planning team's goals at each stage of the planning process.

Reminder: Keep in mind that if the local planning team uses focus groups with each of Steps 2 through 5 of the Planning Model, then 4 distinct sets of questions will need to be written!

Samples & Tools: A list of sample questions is included at Section III and can be used as a model by local planning teams in developing their own question lists.

- a. Begin by brainstorming within the planning group to generate a variety of ideas from which the team will develop the final questions to be used. Revise the rough questions several times until the group reaches consensus on their clarity, and then show them to several impartial individuals outside the group to gain even more objective feedback. Revise the questions again based on this feedback.
- b. Refine and identify questions as 5-minute, 10-minute, or 15-minute questions. The 5-minute questions occur at the beginning of the focus group to introduce the topic; the 10-minute questions are the areas of central concern that drive the study; the 15-minute questions are the most crucial questions in the study. Remember, the pacing of the questions is important to ensure that everyone in the focus group is given a chance to react to every question within the allotted time of a focus group meeting! (See Question Progression below.)
- c. Question Progression: The questions posed in a focus group meeting should move from the general to the specific. Begin organizing your draft questions into the following categories:
 - i. *Opening:* Questions designed to help the focus group participants get acquainted and feel connected (1 – 2 questions)

- ii. *Introductory*: Questions which begin discussion of the topic (2 – 3 questions)
 - iii. *Key questions*: Questions that focus on obtaining insights and information about the study's central concerns (3 to 5 questions)
 - iv. *Closing questions*: Questions that bring closure to the discussion and that encourage reflection on previous comments (1 to 2 questions).
- d. Revise for phrasing: Open-ended questions are the most distinctive feature of an effective focus group session as they greatly increase the chances of collecting unbiased data. This is so because the open-ended question does not imply or suggest a prescribed correct answer. Instead, participants are encouraged to respond based on their specific situation. Such questions encourage participants to reveal their mind as opposed to what the interviewer thinks is on their mind.

Example	
Closed question (answer is implied)	Open-ended question
In your opinion, how inefficient is our traffic court system?	What has been your experience of our traffic court system?

- e. Avoid asking “Why.” Encourage personal reflection: “Why” questions encourage participants to speak from the brain rather than from the deeper forces that motivate behavior. In answering them, the participant often intellectualizes the answer or searches for the implied correct response. Moreover, the “Why” question reminds some people of an interrogation. This can raise defensive barriers. Remember that the purpose of using a focus group is to gather real, valid reactions to court systems – not politically correct platitudes. “Think back” questions are a good way to encourage participants to reflect upon their personal experiences and are less threatening than “Why” questions.

Example	
Don't Ask	Do Ask
Why do you think the traffic court system in this county is so controversial?	Think back to your last experience of traffic court. Can you name one positive and one negative aspect of that experience?

- f. Keep questions simple: Don't make the questions too complex – and by all means, avoid multi-part questions. Participants are confused by them and often forget to answer all the various components, depriving researchers of valuable data.

Example	
Don't Ask	Do Ask
In your opinion, what are the ingredients of an effective traffic court system?	How would you describe an effective traffic court system?

- g. Be cautious about using questions that give examples: Such questions may provide ideas for a type of response; however, they can also limit the respondent's thinking. They may seem to give the respondent clues about the type of answer that is desired.
- h. Ask positive questions before negative questions: A questioning strategy that works well asks focus group members to comment on both positive and negative experiences or observations. It is interesting that experts agree that this strategy works best when the first request is for positive items as opposed to negative ones. Perhaps this reflects socialization that we shouldn't say anything bad unless we've first said something good.
- i. Ask useful follow-up questions: Follow-up questions are linked to the preceding question by logic or reason. It may be useful to think of them as two-part questions. The first question is asked to define or understand a problem or situation. This is followed by a question of opinion, interpretation, behavior, and so forth. The first question anchors the concept, and the second builds on it.

Example	
First Question	Follow Up
When it comes to providing minority group access to the courts in our community, what are the areas needing improvement?	Which of these areas is most important?

5. ***Putting the focus group together – guidelines.***

- a. Homogeneity: The need for compatible participants: Experts agree that in focus groups compatibility is the key concern. When the participants perceive each other as fundamentally similar, they spend less time explaining themselves to each other and more time discussing the issues at hand. The most common demographic characteristics for determining focus group composition are:
 - i. gender
 - ii. race or ethnicity
 - iii. age
 - iv. location or residence
 - v. education
 - vi. occupation
 - vii. income
 - viii. marital status or family composition
- b. Group size: Typical group size for most purposes is six to ten participants. This range provides enough different opinions to stimulate a discussion without making each participant compete for time to talk.
- c. Number of groups: The number of groups asked to respond to a given set of questions is typically three to five. However, deciding on the right number of focus groups to conduct is a matter of hearing what there is to hear. If practically everyone has the same thoughts on a given question list this will be evident after a few groups. When the responses are more diverse it will take more group meetings to hear what people have to say. **Caution:** Using just one group can be risky since their opinions may not be representative of the community at large!
- d. Where to recruit participants for focus groups: There are many sources for locating potential focus group participants from the general population. These include existing lists and open solicitation.

- i. *Existing lists:* The local team can seek mailing lists from utility companies, the clerk of the county court, the bureau of motor vehicles, the board of elections. They may also wish to check the Yellow Pages under “Mailing Lists.”
 - ii. *Open solicitation:* Another way to locate focus group participants is to advertise for them. Newspapers are the most common way to solicit participants, but bulletin boards, newsletters and broadcast media are also possibilities. **Note:** Offering to pay focus group participants – even when the payment is nominal – has been shown to improve response.
- e. Court stakeholders. In scheduling and conducting focus groups, it is especially important for the county court planning team to identify external and internal stakeholder groups that should be represented in the process of soliciting feedback about the courts. The identity of these groups should be based on the courts’ local communities. Included below are examples of focus groups identified by three different counties in California for participation in their county court planning efforts.

Examples	
County Courts	Stakeholder Focus Groups
Sacramento	<p><i>Juror Focus Groups:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Randomly selected from juror pool ▪ Voluntary participation <p><i>External Stakeholders:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Education Group ▪ Frequent Users Group ▪ Religious Community Group ▪ Disability Group ▪ Legal Aid and Nonprofit Group ▪ Attorney Group ▪ Hispanic Community Group ▪ African-American Group ▪ Asian-American Group <p><i>Internal Stakeholders:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 10 groups of court staff representing a majority of all job classifications and units in the organization

Examples (cont'd)	
County Courts	Stakeholder Focus Groups
El Dorado	<p><i>External Stakeholders:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Citizens ▪ Attorney Groups ▪ Civic/Community Groups ▪ Service Providers to the Court <p><i>Internal Stakeholders:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Criminal Justice Agency Employees ▪ Court Employees
San Mateo	<p><i>External Stakeholders:</i></p> <p>Stakeholders reached via a series of well publicized public forums held in various locations in the county.</p>

- f. Ensuring attendance at focus group sessions: Once participants have been recruited for a given focus group, the local team should consider the following steps to ensure attendance at the session:
- i. One week before the meeting: mail a written confirmation.
 - ii. One day before the meeting: make a follow-up telephone call.

6. **Conducting the focus group session: the role of the facilitator.**

A facilitator guides focus group meetings. Therefore, choosing the facilitator is one of the most influential factors affecting the quality of focus group results. **Note:** The facilitator should *always* be assisted at focus groups meetings by someone charged with taking notes and/or operating tape-recording devices.

- a. Principles of neutral facilitation: Effective facilitators are guided by the following principles:
- i. *Believe that the participants have knowledge to share*: Effective facilitators are interested in the participants and demonstrate a positive regard for them.
 - ii. *Be a facilitator, not a participant*: An effective facilitator guides the discussion and *listens* to what is said. The facilitator should *not* engage in discussion, share personal views, or otherwise shape the outcome of the group interview.
 - iii. *Be prepared to hear unpleasant views*: Effective facilitators suspend emotional involvement. It may be difficult to hear participants with limited knowledge of the courts offer half-truths and criticize programs that are near and dear to the facilitator's

heart. However, if unbiased data is to be gathered, the facilitator must suspend his/her personal views and seek out the perceptions of the focus group participants.

- iv. *Be familiar with the focus group question list:* Effective facilitators are intimately familiar with the question list and will know the rationale behind each question – including why a given question has been placed where it is in the discussion. The best facilitators *do not read* the questions, as losing eye contact with the participants can destroy the spontaneous flow of the discussion. A good technique is to have the questions written on flipcharts and reveal each question to the group as it is posed.

b. What the facilitator does during the focus group: Effective facilitators:

- i. *Greet and speak with focus group participants:* Make small talk prior to beginning the group discussion. As participants arrive, greet them and make them feel comfortable and welcome.
- ii. *Introduce the process to focus group members:* A possible pattern for introducing the group discussion consists of the following:
 - 1. Welcome
 - 2. Overview of the topic – why you're here
 - 3. Guidelines or ground rules
 - 4. Opening question

Samples & Tools: A sample introduction is included at Section III.

- iii. *Ask the questions in a conversational manner:* Be sure that the participants understand the question.
- iv. *Be prepared to minimize side-tracking:* Focus groups relating to community organizations often get side-tracked onto an evaluation of agency professionals—a topic not necessarily relevant to the local planning team's purpose. The facilitator should be prepared to intervene in such cases. It may be helpful to include a comment in the introduction about the scope of the focus group study. For example: "We are more interested in your opinions about court programs, building facilities, and activities and less concerned about the people who deliver those services."

- v. *Remain neutral by controlling personal reactions:* Facilitators must be attentive to how they respond to comments—both verbally and nonverbally. Often unconscious gestures and comments suggest agreement or disagreement and can shape the direction of participant responses. Some things to avoid:
- Head nodding that indicates agreement/disagreement
 - Short verbal responses – like “correct,” “that’s good,” or “excellent” – that imply judgments about the quality of the comment.
- vi. *Be comfortable with the pause:* Novice facilitators often talk too much. One essential ingredient of effective moderating is the 5-second pause. The 5-second pause is often used after a participant’s comment or after a question is posed. This pause can prompt additional response and points of view, especially when coupled with eye contact.
- vii. *Use ‘probes’ as needed to elicit additional information:* Occasionally participants will offer vague or ambiguous responses to the questions posed – responses like “I agree,” or “That seems accurate.” Effective facilitators will follow-up such responses with probing questions such as:
- “Would you explain further?”
 - “Can you give me an example of what you mean?”
 - “Would you say more?”
 - “Please describe what you mean.”
 - “I don’t understand.”
 - “Tell me more about that.”
 - “How does that work?”
- viii. *Listen and guide the discussion:* One of the greatest challenges for facilitators is to make the distinction between people talking and people answering the question. Often the participants will respond to a question with a tangential comment to which subsequent speakers respond. Thus, the discussion quickly shifts off topic. When this happens, the facilitator must be ready to pull the discussion back where it belongs.

- ix. *Be mindful of the time:* The facilitator must decide when enough has been said on a particular question and when to move on to the next question. Some factors to consider:
 - How important is the question
 - Are the participants becoming redundant in their responses
 - How much time is left in the session (2 hours is the maximum recommended session length)
- x. *Close the focus group meeting by summarizing the discussion:* The facilitator summarizes the discussion and then asks, “Have we missed anything?” This closure may uncover some avenues of thought that were not previously addressed.
- xi. *Get people to leave:* Thank the members for their participation. Be prepared to answer questions about how the local planning team will use the information gathered.

7. Analyzing and reporting focus group results.

The process of analyzing and reporting focus group data will be shaped by the priorities and dynamics of the local court planning team members. What follows are some general steps to consider in organizing and using the data collected from your focus group meetings. *Remember: maintaining confidentiality is very important. The names of group participants and court staff should not be included in focus group reports nor should the information gathered from focus groups be circulated outside the appropriate court planning groups or released to the press for publication.*

- a. Organize the field notes/tape transcripts and other data from each focus group meeting.
- b. What were the most important themes or ideas that came out of the focus group meeting? Write them down.
- c. If multiple focus groups responded to the same question list, how did their responses vary? Did they identify the same or different important themes? Make a comprehensive list of any differences.
- d. Synthesize the above-referenced information and make a list of the key conclusions. What points/themes/ideas need to be considered by the planning team in tackling/revising its local plan.
- e. Organize the data to fit the draft local court plan.

III. Sample Introductory Remarks and Focus Group Questions

1. *Sample introduction for a focus group session.*

The following introductory remarks for a focus group were adapted from remarks developed for a private enterprise Quality of Service Improvement research project.

“Good evening, and welcome to our session tonight. Thank you for taking the time to join our discussion on the local courts. My name is _____, and I represent _____ County’s local community-focused court planning team. This team has been charged with preparing a county strategic plan for the courts. We want to hear how members of the general public feel about _____ County’s courts. We’ve invited people from the general public to share their thoughts and ideas. The members of this group have been selected because you share common characteristics and/or because you’ve had occasion to use the local courts. We are particularly interested in your views based on personal experience of the courts.

Tonight we’ll be discussing your thoughts and opinions about the courts. We basically want to know what you like and what you don’t like about the courts and court services and what might be done to improve your experiences. Keep in mind that we are more interested in your opinions about court programs, building facilities, and activities, and less concerned about the people who deliver those services. There are no wrong answers but rather differing points of view. Please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said. Remember that we’re just as interested in negative comments as positive comments and, at times, the negative comments are the most helpful.

Before we begin, let me suggest some things that will make our discussion more productive. Please speak up – only one person should talk at a time. We’re tape recording the session because we don’t want to miss any of your comments. We’ll be on a first-name basis but in our later reports there will not be any names attached to comments. You may be assured of confidentiality.

My role here is to ask questions and to listen. I won’t be participating in the conversation but I want you to feel free to talk with one another. I’ll be asking about a dozen questions and I’ll be moving the discussion from one

question to the next. There is a tendency in these discussions for some people to talk a lot and some people not to say much. But it is important for us to hear from each of you tonight because you have different experiences. So if one of you is sharing a lot, I may ask you to let others talk. And if you aren't saying much, I may ask for your opinion. We've placed name cards on the table in front of you to help us remember each other's names. Let's begin. Let's find out some more about each other by going around the room. Tell us about a memorable experience you've had of the court system and what made it so. _____, let's start with you."

2. *Sample focus group questions.*

The following sample questions were adapted from two sources: (1) focus group questions developed by the Superior Court of California, County of Sacramento, for its community-focused court planning effort, and (2) questions developed for a private enterprise Quality of Service Improvement research project. The questions range in subject matter from court values to court services and the quality of customer service. Please feel free to use these sample questions or to modify them as appropriate to serve your local planning activities.

1. Core values

- a. What values do you think the court system embodies?
- b. What values do you want your court system to embody?

2. Mission of the courts

- a. In the last few years, our court system has received some pretty high profile media attention from people who have varying ideas about the court system and what it should be. What is "the court" to you?
- b. Can you identify the agencies, groups and people that you believe represent the court?
- c. In your opinion, what is the fundamental purpose of the court?
- d. What is it that you think the court does?
- e. (i) What do people come to the court for? (ii) How have you utilized the court before?

3. Trends

- a. What trends do you think will be affecting this court in the next five years?
- b. Can you give some examples of how you see these trends beginning to surface now?

4. Access and fairness

- a. Accessibility can cover many concepts, including convenience, interpreter services, costs, disability issues, customer service, legal representation and/or assistance, and safety. How accessible is the _____ County court for your needs?
- b. Based on your interactions with the _____ County court, do you perceive our justice system to be fair? If no, in what areas do you perceive that there is a lack of fairness?

5. Meeting public needs

- a. Based on a scale of 1 – 5, with one being “not at all,” three being “sometimes met,” and five being “always met,” how close do you think the ____ County courts are to meeting your needs?
- b. What do you think we need to work on in order to meet your needs?
- c. Out of the needs just identified, which ones do you feel should be placed on the court planning team’s top priority list?

6. Customer service

- a. In the last few years, we’ve often heard the words “customer service.” When you hear this expression, what comes to mind?
- b. Think about the last time you experienced exceptionally good service, regardless of where you had that experience. What happened that makes you describe your experience as exceptionally good service?
- c. Think about a recent experience when you’ve received poor service. What happened that makes you describe your experience as poor service?
- d. Let’s think about customer service in the public sector. How is it different from or similar to that of the private sector?
- e. Now let’s talk specifically about the local courts. How does the customer service there compare with other public sector or government agencies or organizations?
- f. Take a piece of paper and write down three things that are important ingredients of customer service at the local courts. Then, list three things that public organizations that provide

excellent customer service do. [When finished] Okay, let's list these on the flip chart/blackboard.

- g. When you do business with the local courts, what is the single most important thing that could happen that would make you say that the service is fantastic?
- h. On the other hand, what single thing could happen that might make you say that the service is just simply awful?
- i. Think about all that we have talked about today. What do you think is most important for the local courts to keep doing?
- j. Conversely, what do you think is most important for the local courts to change or improve?

7. Other

- a. Is there anything that we haven't covered that you would like to share with the group?

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